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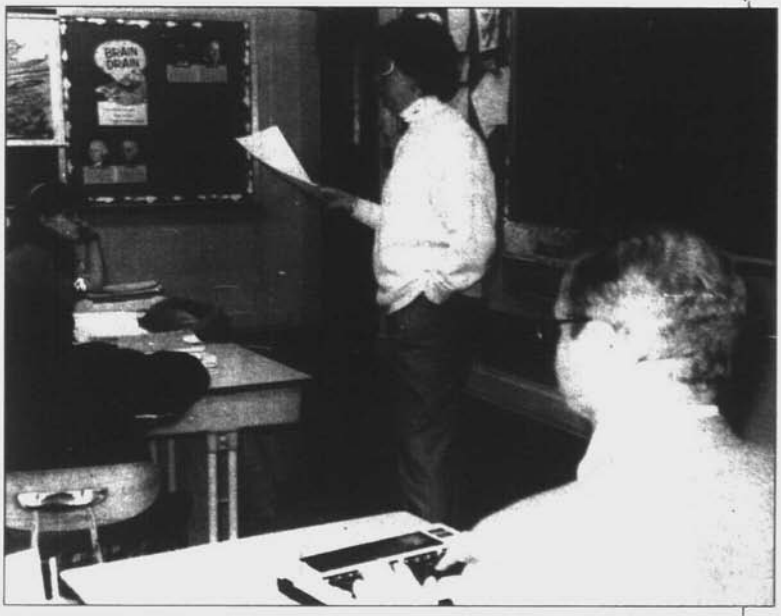
The Computer As a Supervisory Tool

By scripting classroom interaction on a laptop computer, principals can give teachers an objective record that enhances collegial analysis.

Can principals apply modern computer technology as a supervisory tool? As a junior high school principal responsible for supervising more than 50 teachers, I have found that a small laptop computer can help me structure the elements of clinical supervision, record data items, and, most important, quickly produce a complete transcript of classroom interaction for the teacher prior to the postobservation conference. By analyzing and reflecting on the observational data in advance, both the teacher and I can prepare ourselves for a more collegial conference.



Using a laptop computer, the principal records his observations of teacher and student behavior.

The Computer in Clinical Supervision

Preobservation conference. After entering organizational headings under which we structure observation, the teacher and I work through a series of questions on lesson objectives, student readiness, planned follow-up, teaching strategies, and indicators of learning. We consider lesson objectives and data that I will collect during the observation. After we respond to these questions, we both receive a printed copy of our answers.

Observation. While observing, I use the computer to record teacher and student behaviors under specific headings and note the time of each entry. My own notes are identified in the record as notes rather than as observed events. After the observation, I edit the observation transcript for the teacher.

Transcript analysis. Guided by a memo which I've already sent to the teacher, the teacher and I review the transcript. We identify content errors, divide the transcript into instructional episodes, and label each episode (review, concept development, applica-

During the observation, the principal inserts his own comments into the moment-by-moment record he makes on the computer.

tion, etc.). We look for interactions that significantly affect learning and, finally, determine whether the lesson accomplished the stated learning objectives.

Postobservation conference. The teacher and I meet after each of us has analyzed the transcript independently. We try for consensus as we draw conclusions, develop recommendations for improvement, and, if necessary, devise plans for obtaining the technical assistance needed to implement the recommendations.

Final report. I summarize the observation by using information from the postobservation conference discussion to respond to questions that I have already programmed into the computer. These questions involve lesson design, communication patterns, and identification of events having a significant impact on learning. The preobservation conference, the observation transcript, and the final report are sent to the teacher for final review before filing.

Advantages and Disadvantages

I did not immediately achieve my original objectives for using a laptop—reduced paperwork and increased speed. The laptop enabled me to structure the observation process so that I was able to improve my skills. After a year of practice, my improved efficiency makes increased speed and decreased paperwork seem attainable.

With a printout of the computer record as the basis of discussion, teacher and principal hold postobservation conference.

Disadvantages are more apparent than real. At first, the computer seems too intrusive and mechanical for classroom observations. The keys click and students and teachers often wonder what I am doing with it. The sense of instrusiveness doesn't last long, however, and everyone adjusts quickly.

If my typing were better, I would have to look at the keyboard less often. But I've found that by typing while listening and occasionally scanning the room, I can gather data effectively.

Supervision to Improve Instruction

I began using the laptop computer and software for clinical supervision after paper and pencil records became cumbersome for me to use and unresponsive to concerns that teachers were expressing. Teachers did not feel that they were able to participate in assessing their lessons or in developing suggestions for improving their own teaching. The computer-assisted observations have made the paperwork more manageable and the data gathering more objective. Most important, they have enabled the teachers and I to change the patterns of information exchange between us.

The laptop has not solved all problems. Using a word processing computer in supervisory practice does not diminish the need for training and skill in interpersonal relationships. Some problems relate to traditional role expectations, such as the expectation that the supervisor will tell the teacher exactly what to do to improve teaching. That attitude, of course, contributes little to teacher self-improvement because it makes the supervisor solely responsible for directing instructional change.

Because the computer technology can make information available more quickly, it makes possible teachers' timely and positive contributions in a joint venture to improve instruction. Teachers assess and discuss observational data before the process reaches its final stages, and they can influence the contents of the final report and the actions that follow from it. As a result, improving instruction becomes a cooperative mission.□

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